



STAGES OF TRANSITION

Karen Newnham, Global Interaction's Director of Human Resources, conducts regular training sessions for candidates preparing for cross-cultural work. One training program is dedicated entirely to coping in transition. Here she shares with us a model that helps with understanding the stages of transition.

Life for all of us is a series of transitions as we move from infancy through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. Concurrent with these life changes are those imposed by self or others as we move from school to work, relocate and change responsibilities. The intercultural worker adds cross-cultural dimensions to these normal changes, which often increases the frequency and intensity of change. An understanding of the process of transition not only can help cross-cultural workers but can also help all of us to transition the stages of life well.

While each experience of transition is a personal journey, the following model (see bridge diagram above) describes some common phases experienced by people making any transition. The manner in which the general issues impact each individual varies in kind and intensity depending on their life experiences and the nature of the transition.

Stage 1 – Own culture

In making a transition we start in our own culture, where we are comfortable. We know how to behave, the correct social cues, our roles and the place we belong in all that surrounds us.

Stage 2 – Leaving

As we begin to transition, we find ourselves at a stage where things are done for the last time in the old way and this brings with it a mixture of feelings, both good and bad. People start to distance themselves from you and sometimes this may happen before you are even ready to let go. You find yourself surrounded by people making plans that don't include you. It is crucial at this time to recognise that in order to enter fully into the transition, you need to make sure

that you say goodbye well. When you try to live in two environments at once – holding on to what you have left, as well as what you are going to – you find yourself doing neither well. You become split between them. This distancing from people and disengaging from responsibilities needs to begin even before you transition.

Stage 3 – Transition/Chaos

The next stage entered as you cross this bridge is the Transition/Chaos stage. It is at this time that you begin to focus on the future. Decisions have been made and you move on. You enter into survival mode. You find that you do not know how to behave and live well. If your transition includes a new language you find yourself with less ability to speak and express yourself than even a 3 year old. The following poem by Dr Jennifer Noesjirwan expresses it well:

*There is something I don't know
That I am supposed to know
I don't know what it is that I don't know
And yet am supposed to know
And I feel I look stupid
If I seem both not to know it
And not know what it is I don't know
Therefore I pretend I know it.
This is nerve-racking
Since I don't know what I must pretend to know.
Therefore I pretend I know everything
I feel you know what I am supposed to know
But you can't tell me what it is
Because you don't know that I don't
Know what it is.
You may know what I don't know
But not that I don't know it
And I can't tell you. So you will*

Have to tell me everything.
In this phase the home and daily life routines are dismantled and it is generally characterised by 'chaos'. A person usually has a sense of grief associated with the losses, confusion from a lack of schedule and task expectations, and over sensitivity in common problems. It is often a time of status-less-ness and ambiguity. Comfort and stability can be gained through clear identification of personal expectations, expression of questions and fears, and maintenance of daily rituals and practices (e.g. family times, personal devotions).

The rescheduling of the body clock through proper eating and rest gradually provides energy to begin the process of positively coping with the new state of being. It also reduces the tendency to withdraw, become depressed or panic. The assistance of supportive people to learn survival language and enable you to meet your basic living needs sets the stage for long-term transition.

Stage 4 - Entering

As you move on and begin to enter the new stage it is helpful to identify bridge people. "Bridge people" are people who can help you understand the new situation.

At this stage you find yourself facing many questions like: "What does it mean to be a person in transition? What is my status here? How am I ever going to cope?"

At this point you move from being a guest to being a learner. These first steps consume large amounts of emotional, physical and mental energy. The commitment to positive attitudes, realistic expectations, coping strategies and an awareness of

self will help to provide the focus for the main task of becoming comfortable again. By using all available learning and living opportunities you are able to build relationships and become comfortable in the new place and situation.

Stage 5 – New Culture

The final stage is where you become a part of the new. You have crossed the bridge and now can embrace your new life. In most situations you have a growing confidence. As you gain understanding and accept your new life, you will become more at home and comfortable. Nostalgia at special times like birthdays and Christmas is normal. But you suddenly realise that the place you are now in feels like home and that feeling continues to grow. Coming to this point requires a willingness to accept people and situations as they are, a recognition that it is not disloyal to family and past friends to enjoy one's present situation. Reflection during this phase identifies areas for growth and your own awareness of self.

Remember, transition comes to an end and you are no longer on the bridge. You will start to belong to the new.

KAREN NEWNHAM
Director of Human Resources